

Anja Cuhalev

Can art act as a form of diplomacy?

Diplomacy is usually associated with international relations including professional diplomats having discussions about peace, war, culture, economy, etc. Taking that into consideration, can art, made by artists who were not educated in the field of diplomacy, intercultural communication or politics do the job? Also, should it have to?

Artworks are normally created in order to satisfy certain human needs. In the framework of intercultural communication we cannot unequivocally expect the artworks of another culture to have the same effect on people from other parts of the world. Pieces made under a certain influence and on a specific topic can be misunderstood if moved from their original environment. Which implies that there can come to some sort of miscommunication. A good example of this is the case of twelve Muhammad cartoons posted in 2005 in the Danish newspaper The Jyllands-Posten. The newspaper stated that the publications were an attempt to start a debate regarding criticism of Islam and self-censorship, but critics of the cartoons described them as Islamophobic and racists, the cartoons also provoked certain protests in Muslim societies across the world.

Obviously not all art is meant to deal with international relations and to reach different cultures but since it is a public affair it might cause problematic situations anyway, as it did in the example mentioned above.

With contemporary art we face yet another issue. Because it is normally conceptual it can be mostly focused towards art specialist or artists and has in that case a specific audience. Is its influence then sufficient to make a difference towards cultural connections? There is a specific branch of contemporary art which includes professional artists who work with the community to produce so called „community art,, but one has to wonder how successful projects in that area actually are seeing that the emphasis is not as much on the quality of the final products but merely on inclusion of society.

At the same time there are independent contemporary artists such as Banksy, who focus completely towards the public and create art that can be understood by the locals.

The case of Banksy is also a good example of unintentional international communications as he inspired copy cat artists to produce similar works of art in various other parts of the world such as street art pieces by unknown artists in Russia.

Turning more towards history and the intercultural relations that went on in the past, we do see good examples of art achieving something beyond its primary role, for example when Europe first got acquainted with African art. Europe did not properly know the culture of Africa and it considered it at the very least bizarre. But that drastically changed in the 1920s with the import of African sculptures. In that case art was successful at developing empathy towards Africa as well as at building a bridge between different cultures.

Also, the majority of art works that we appreciate the most now, originate from a number of countries and cultures, not everyone can be the same nationality as Michelangelo or Picasso. A question that presents itself there though is, do we actually understand the art and its original message or do we merely appreciate its esthetic quality that is relative to our culture?

All in all, art is basically like a conversation, sometimes you just don't quite get what the other person is trying to say but you can still enjoy listening to the dialect. Is that good enough

for international relations? Maybe not, but as long as people appreciate the effort, ideas, talent and uniqueness behind art creations of different cultures, it's a good place to start.